The Word Wall Approach:
Promoting L2 Vocabulary Learning

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Vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner"
(Zimmerman 1997:5). Our second language (L2) students would be the first ones to tell us that a
curriculum-wide commitment to vocabulary enrichment assists them in developing their
language abilities. Fortunately for students and instructors, most vocabulary growth takes place
through incidental learning, that is, through exposure to comprehensible language in reading,
listening, discussions, bulletin board displays, videos, and so forth. Reading has been singled out
as the primary means, and the most reliable way, to promote incidental vocabulary learning
(Stahl 1999). In fact, Nagy and Herman (1985, 1987) claim that teachers should promote reading
because it leads to greater vocabulary growth than any program of explicit instruction.

The recognition of the importance of incidental learning does not preclude, however, the
exploration of ways in which vocabulary learning can be enhanced through direct teaching
(Carter 1998). L2 students, even if they are avid readers with many reading materials at their
fingertips, appreciate and benefit from explicit vocabulary instruction. Through a range of
instructional activities, language students can actively and consciously expand their vocabulary
knowledge. Meaningful instruction should of course include the explicit teaching of word
meanings and discussions about words and their prefixes, suffixes, and roots. But it should also
include dictionary exercises, word family activities, semantic mapping, semantic feature
analyses, word associations, synonym and antonym activities, cognate awareness exercises,
practice with lexical sets, classification activities, and strategy instruction.1 Although classroom
instruction of these types cannot account for all the words students need to learn, it is well
documented that direct instruction promotes vocabulary development (Carter 1998, Nation 1990,
Stahl 1999).

In this article, we outline three principles which can guide teachers in planning for explicit
vocabulary instruction. We describe a vocabulary immersion approach, Green's (1993) Word
Wall, which provides teachers with a versatile mechanism for promoting vocabulary growth in
their classrooms. We then give an account of the adaptations that we made to Green's original
approach to meet the needs of our English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students. We conclude
with a discussion of the initial problems encountered using the Word Wall and our solutions,
presented as a set of teacher guidelines.

Principles for Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Research that has focused on vocabulary learning can guide teachers in planning explicit
vocabulary instruction. For the purposes of this article, we focus on three research findings of
particular relevance to language classroom settings. First, research has demonstrated that
vocabulary learning requires multiple exposures to new lexical items in various discourse
contexts. Multiple exposures, of varying intensities and in diverse contexts, are said to gradually

lead to a large recognition vocabulary (see Grabe and Stoller 1997). Some researchers claim that a minimum of 10 to 12 exposures is needed for learners to begin to see the range of meanings and uses for new lexical items (Coady 1997; Paribakht and Wesche 1997). Duquette and Painchaud (1996:163) assert that "lexical competence is progressively constructed by the repeated occurrence of a word within a variety of new contexts." Claims such as these suggest that teachers should consider the ways in which they systematically recycle important vocabulary in the classroom.

Second, research has revealed that elaborated vocabulary learning occurs when students make meaningful connections between new and already familiar words. Instructional approaches that juxtapose new and known words (through, for example, semantic mapping and semantic feature analysis) allow students to use known words in new contexts, with new nuances, new meanings, and new collocations and to use new words with practical associations. This expanded sense of new and known words allows for faster processing of semantically related words.

Third, research has shown that context can be a powerful influence on students' vocabulary growth (Stahl 1999). But learning words from context is a long-term process during which word meanings are slowly accumulated through exposure and learning. By means of explicit instruction, language teachers can "compress that process so that students can learn more words in a shorter period of time" (Stahl 1999:14). Key here is the need to focus instructional attention on words that students have encountered in rich contexts (usually through reading), rather than from decontextualized word lists.

The Word Wall approach, expanded upon in the remainder of this article, easily accommodates the three principles of vocabulary learning that were just introduced. As will become evident, the Word Wall provides opportunities for multiple exposures to lexical items; it encourages students to make connections between new and known words; and it can be used in response to meaningful contexts or to build relevant context around new words. Equally important, the Word Wall promotes active student involvement, a key to effective learning in general.

The Word Wall Approach

The Word Wall approach (Green 1993) was originally designed to challenge and motivate high-achieving as well as reluctant first language students (in elementary and secondary classrooms) to develop vocabulary learning skills and to internalize new vocabulary. Using a set of six word-filled wall panels, each with a different background color corresponding to a different curricular objective (e.g., phonic elements, word form classes, grammatical forms, or spelling patterns), Green literally surrounded his students with words. The ever-present "walls of words" became an integral part of his classroom. Each panel included lexical items selected from vocabulary lists corresponding to classroom readers and lists of high-frequency English words. The walls of words were not used as the only instructional tool for vocabulary development in his classroom, Green also integrated them into various classroom lessons, accommodating individual, pair, small group, and whole class instruction. Students consulted the Word Wall as a thesaurus and spell-check during writing assignments; they used it as a resource during language development lessons, and they often turned to the Word Wall for rainy-day lunch and recess activities. Specific lessons and competitive games were devised around the Word Wall to encourage the

development of vocabulary learning strategies and to build students' vocabularies through explicit instruction, implicit learning, multiple exposures, and opportunities for making meaningful connections among words. The repetition and recycling made possible by using the Word Wall approach, and the possibility for students to see, touch, hear, say, and write the words, resulted in greater vocabulary retention and an enthusiasm for learning vocabulary.

Adapting Green's Word Wall for Various Instructional Settings

Green's Word Wall approach can be adapted for a range of L2 instructional settings without sacrificing its commitment to vocabulary development. The flexibility of the approach makes it easily adaptable for settings where space considerations, curricular priorities, student motivation, and student needs may require changes in procedure.

Adaptations in five areas are worth pointing out. First, Green used multiple walls, devoting each one to a particular language objective. Limited classroom wall space may determine how the basic approach is realized in other instructional settings. In our intensive English program, we used one full wall of our classroom for the Word Wall, placing paper word strips on the carpeted wall with small pieces of self-adhesive Velcro. In other classrooms, an unused blackboard, the space above a chalkboard, a bulletin board, sheets of butcher paper, or portable poster boardmay be most useful for teachers who do not have exclusive use of a classroom. The poster board could serve as the background for lexical items. Regardless of how words are actually displayed, what is important is that words be added gradually and remain easily visible to all students (Moore, Moore, Cunningham, and Cunningham 1994).

Second, Green's use of colors to distinguish one Word Wall from another can also be adapted for diverse classroom settings. Each of Green's walls had a different background color, each color corresponding to a separate language goal; for example, words on the blue panel highlighted certain spelling conventions, and words on the orange panel depicted certain phonics rules. If only one wall is available, individual lexical items, rather than the wall itself, can be color coded. Depending on curricular goals and student needs, the colors used might correspond to specific word classes, such as green for nouns, blue for verbs, orange for adjectives, and yellow for adverbs. Colors could also correspond to different thematic units, for example, violet for words first encountered in a unit (or chapter) on pollution and red for words encountered in a unit on endangered species. Colors might also be used to identify the curricular component in which the new lexical item was first introduced, like tan for words encountered in a reading class and pink for words introduced in a listening class. We implemented the latter approach, using separate colors for lexical items first encountered in our core content-based course (pink), reading lab (green), video course (yellow), and TOEFL preparation course (blue). These color designations triggered associations in our students' minds about the place and time they first encountered the word, thereby facilitating word recognition and use.

A third adaptation to Green's approach relates to the types of exercises used with the Word Wall lexicon. The use of phonics and an emphasis on spelling patterns may not be appropriate for all instructional settings. Thus, teachers will need to devise activities that meet the vocabulary learning needs of their own students. For example, some teachers may want to focus on synonyms and antonyms, word order, collocations, and semantic groupings to reinforce

vocabulary building and introduce students to vocabulary learning strategies. (More specific suggestions for Word Wall use are included in the next section of this article.)

The fourth adaptation deals with choice of lexical items for the Word Wall. Green selected words from formal word lists and then placed them on his various Word Wall panels. Lexical items can also be selected directly from the "texts" that students are exposed to in class, interpreted broadly to mean all sources of content information including readings, videos, charts and graphs, lectures, and so forth. In our opinion, lexical items that students have encountered (or are going to encounter) in real texts, for authentic communicative purposes, are the best candidates for the Word Wall. The contextualized exposure and realization that the word is important are likely to assist students in learning the vocabulary item and connecting it to other words encountered in other texts and on the Word Wall.

Furthermore, there is no need to restrict selection decisions to the teacher alone. In fact, involving students actively in lexical item selection (the fifth adaptation) has many benefits. When students are given the chance to select words for the Word Wall, they often develop a sense of ownership toward the Word Wall and its contents. The act of selecting a Word Wall entry often leads to multiple exposures to the word as a result of deliberate decision-making and negotiations with classmates.

Word Wall Activities that Promote Vocabulary Learning

Teachers can devise any number of explicit instructional activities and games to make use of the Word Wall itself and the lexical items placed on the Word Wall. Curricular priorities and student needs will determine, in large part, the nature of the activities integrated into the classroom. It can be assumed that students will make reference to the Word Wall at other times, on their own, when editing their written work, when engaged in problem-solving activities, when reading, and so forth. The incidental learning that takes place as a result of the ever-present Word Wall is likely to contribute to students' vocabulary learning.

We describe here a small sampling of Word Wall activities that can be integrated into L2 instruction to promote vocabulary learning and to support language skills development. Some of these activities require very little class time, whereas others can become part of more substantive lessons. What is important to remember is that each encounter with a word from the Word Wall and its meaning will contribute to students' growing understanding of a word and the many contexts in which it can be used. For ease of presentation, we have divided the sample activities below into three categories based on their primary focus: explicit vocabulary building, reading and writing, and speaking and listening.

Explicit Vocabulary Building Activities

The Word Wall can be used for explicit vocabulary building in numerous ways. The activities described below represent a fraction of the options that teachers have to assist students in developing their vocabulary. Many traditional vocabulary-building activities can be adapted and used with the Word Wall.

Word clustering. The creative movement and reorganization of lexical items on the Word Wall will help students make connections between new and known items as well as semantically related words. Examples of creative groupings include clusters of topically related lexical items, pairs of logically linked adjectives and nouns, pairs of synonyms and antonyms, groups of words from the same word class, semantic groupings, and lexical linkages that are simply playful.

Multiple meaning awareness activities. Students can be asked to find Word Wall items with more than one meaning (e.g., spring refers to a season of the year, the action of moving quickly, a small body of water, and an object similar to a coil). In pairs or groups, students can be asked to write sentences that demonstrate the different meanings of the word or to write definitions.

Vocabulary expansion. The teacher identifies a useful word, which is likely to be unfamiliar to most students, that is repeated throughout a reading passage. The teacher defines the word and then puts it on the Word Wall. Students scan the reading passage for the word and highlight it throughout the passage. The class then discusses other contexts in which the word might appear.

Word part exercise. After teaching students about word parts (e.g., contra-, mis-, dec-, multi-, -tion, -ly), the teacher directs students to find words on the Word Wall that have identifiable word parts. The teacher asks questions to determine if students can define the words using their knowledge of word parts.

>Matching. After distributing Word Wall entries to all students in class, students circulate to find classmates who have synonyms, antonyms, or words in the same word class. As a possible variation, half of the students can be given strips with definitions of Word Wall items, and the other half can be given the actual words. Students circulate to match words and definitions.

Finding synonyms or antonyms. The teacher generates a set of sentences with synonyms or antonyms of Word Wall entries underlined. Students must replace the underlined word with its counterpart from the Word Wall.

Crossword puzzles. Using lexical items from the Word Wall, the teacher creates a crossword puzzle. Definitions can be used as clues, or sentences with blanks can be used if context clues lead students to the solution. (Teacher preparation time is reduced if crossword puzzle software is available.)

Reading and Writing Activities

Vocabulary building is often associated with reading and writing instruction. The sample activities described below illustrate three ways in which teachers can integrate the Word Wall into reading and writing instruction.

Cloze passage. The teacher (or students) creates a cloze passage with blanks for Word Wall items. Students attempt to fill in the blanks with appropriate words from the Word Wall.

Free writes/speed writes. Students can be asked to write for a certain length of time, incorporating a designated number of lexical items from the Word Wall into their writing. The

teacher may assign a topic or leave it open. As a variation, teachers can ask students to incorporate Word Wall items into poetry writing, class newspaper articles, or other written assignments.

Journal entry. Students pick a lexical item from the Word Wall and write a journal entry about it. For example, a student can pick the word compassion and write an entry about a compassionate acquaintance.

Speaking and Listening Activities

New vocabulary items can easily be integrated into speaking and listening activities to promote vocabulary growth through meaningful use and recycling. The Word Wall activities described below depict some of the options that teachers can choose from.

Descriptions. Students describe a classmate or classroom object by using Word Wall items. Students can play a game in which they use five words from the Word Wall to describe something or someone in the room while other students try to identify the person or item being described.

Guessing game. In pairs, one student describes a Word Wall entry (i.e., how it is used or its definition) and the student's partner tries to match the clue with a Word Wall item.

Story telling. The whole class tells a story. The teacher models the process by starting the story, including several Word Wall items in the introduction, and pointing to the words on the Word Wall when they are used. A student volunteer builds upon the story line until a designated number of Word Wall entries has been used, and then the story is continued by other students.

Twenty questions. The teacher chooses a word from the Word Wall, and the students guess it by asking the teacher up to 20 yes-or no-questions.

Word Wall Jeopardy. The teacher chooses various words from the Word Wall and places them in categories, such as nouns, adjectives, or content words. Then the teacher supplies definitions to students in "Jeopardy" game-show fashion. Teams of students try to identify the appropriate Word Wall match. The group with the highest number of points wins.

Suggested Guidelines for Word Wall Use

During our initial attempts at integrating a Word Wall into our EAP curriculum, we encountered some minor stumbling blocks. We list the most noteworthy problems and follow that with guidelines that can facilitate the integration of the Word Wall concept into other L2 classrooms.

1. Too many lexical items were placed on the Word Wall during our first semester using the Word Wall. There was simply not enough time to recycle all the Word Wall items into classroom activities so that the words could be retained. Consequently, many items placed on the Word Wall were never revisited or recycled. Thus, at the end of the first semester, many of the Word Wall items were still fairly unfamiliar to students.

2. When students began to select words for the Word Wall, they sometimes chose uncommon or infrequently used words, thereby placing words on the Wall that would have little value for them.

3. Words were placed on the Word Wall uncreatively, most often in orderly horizontal and vertical lines.

4. Initially we restricted Word Wall choices to single words rather than common phrases, idioms, phrasal verbs, or fixed expressions, severely limiting student exposure to other relevant and useful vocabulary.

In response to these problems, we generated a list of guidelines that assisted us in using the Word Wall more effectively during the second semester. We offer the following eight suggestions to help L2 teachers use the Word Wall with ease.

1. Whether lexical items are selected by teachers or students, three criteria need to be met before words are placed on the Wall: The Word Wall entries must be useful to the students, usable by the students, and frequently used by native speakers. Without establishing such criteria, students (and occasionally teachers) might select lexical items that are infrequently used or archaic. Teachers should be able to reject words that do not fall into these categories. To remind students of these criteria, teachers might want to place a small, but conspicuous flyer on the Word Wall.

2. Lexical items that stem from contextualized exposure, rather than a decontextualized word list, are the best candidates for the Word Wall. Posting words that students need to understand to comprehend a reading, a chart or graph, a video, a lecture, a bulletin board display, or a guest speaker is an effective Word Wall strategy.

3. Teachers should consider how many words that they want on the Word Wall at any given time and over the course of a term. At the beginning of any term, the Word Wall will be empty. Over time, as students encounter more new words as a result of exposure to new texts, new lexical items will be chosen for Word Wall placement. In some settings, teachers may choose to rotate words, dating all entries and keeping them on the Wall for a few weeks or for the duration of a specific instructional unit. In other settings, students can vote on the words they want to keep up or take down. Some sort of procedure needs to be established to maintain the flow of words on and off the Word Wall. What is critical, however, is the need to keep entries on the Wall long enough to ensure that students have multiple encounters with the words and opportunities to make connections between new and old entries.

4. Word Wall selections need not be confined to single words. Phrases, idioms, fixed expressions, and phrasal verbs should be included if deemed important for the students.

5. Word Wall items should be placed creatively (e.g., in semantic groupings) rather than in straight, orderly rows on the Word Wall. Teachers and students alike should be willing to move Word Wall entries around on the Wall. Fixed placements limit the usefulness and versatility of the Wall for instructional purposes. Activities that encourage students to move words about reinforce multiple usages and collocations.

6. As emphasized by Green (1993:10), the Word Wall is most effective when it is "a regular and predictable part of classroom activities." It should therefore become a physical presence in the classroom early in the term and a standard instructional tool shortly thereafter.

7. A variety of instructional activities that recycle and review Word Wall items should be devised for classroom use. The physical placement of lexical items on the Word Wall is just the beginning. The Word Wall entries should be incorporated into subsequent speaking, listening, reading, writing, and grammar activities.

8. Depending on student age, maturity, and language proficiency, teachers must decide how to introduce the Word Wall concept. Simply involving students with the ever-present Wall so they develop a noticeable degree of comfort with many lexical items on the Wall can serve as an adequate introduction in some settings. More explicit commentary on vocabulary learning strategies might be appropriate in other classrooms.

Conclusion

The importance of vocabulary for L2 students requires that teachers solidify their commitment to vocabulary building. Teachers can stimulate students' vocabulary growth and retention by rethinking instructional priorities and taking the following steps. First, teachers should make a point of immersing their students in a vocabulary-rich environment to promote the incidental learning of vocabulary. Second, they should increase the amount of reading assigned to their students, because reading is likely to have the greatest impact on students' vocabulary knowledge. Third, they should set aside time for explicit vocabulary instruction that not only teaches word meanings but also provides opportunities for (a) systematic recycling of lexical items in a range of meaningful contexts, (b) connections between new and known lexical items, and (c) active student involvement. The Word Wall approach, as originally conceived and in various adapted renditions, helps students build their vocabulary and vocabulary-learning strategies. The versatility of the approach makes it attractive for teachers in a range of instructional settings. In all cases, the Word Wall can assist students in building their vocabulary, thereby improving their language proficiency and ability to function in the target language.

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